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Young Couples

It's an old African proverb. It is also the title of a wonderful children's book by Jane Cowen Fletcher.

The setting is Africa. Everyone in the village is going to market, carrying produce, pottery, cloth to sell and trade.

Yemi, a little girl, is given the important task, for the first time, of caring for her baby brother.

Yemi feels grown up and important bearing with pride the sole responsibility for her brother's well-being.

At the market, Kokou wanders off. Yemi is beside herself. He will be lost, she thinks; hungry, thirsty, hot, tired and in danger. No such thing happens, of course. The little boy wanders from market stall to market stall and is cared for at each by other men and women from the village; given food, drink, water to cool him, a mat to nap on, pats and smiles, and at the end of the day, when the mat vendor returns him to his family, Yemi has learned the lesson her mother and other people already know: "It takes a village to raise a child."

Margaret Mead said that the nuclear family—mother, father and children living apart from extended family—is a recent invention, and not a very good one. It takes a village . . .

You know the story about Mary and Joseph taking Jesus to Jerusalem when he was twelve and discovering on the way home that he is lost, apparently. The point of the story has to do with Jesus conversing with the learned teachers of the law in the Temple but in the middle of the narration there is a bit of ancient Jewish wisdom. Luke 2:44 reads,

> **"Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. They started to look for**

him among their relatives and friends."

It is a description of a cultural norm, extended family and friends, a village, caring for a child.

J. Randolph Taylor, former President of San Francisco Theological Seminary, tells about his early life as a child in China. His parents were missionaries and when he was three his mother died tragically. His father gathered his five sons, carried them across the Pacific and across the continent until they settled in North Carolina at a place called Montreat, where there were homes for retired missionaries and missionaries on furlough. There, Randy Taylor remembers,

“He put us out and we ran freely on the hills in part because of the knowledge of family and kin, and missionary kin who would take care of us. I know that I owe my life to God and to my mother who bore me and my father who raised me and also to this enormous extended family of missionary kin who surrounded me with the irrefutable evidence of community and caring.” (*Journal for Preachers,* “Pentecost,” 1995)

That is part of what is going on when we baptize babies. There is theological affirmation to be sure. God’s amazing goodness and grace is nowhere more eloquently expressed than in the gift of

life, given to these parents, but given to all of us, over and over. God's love is nowhere more eloquently proclaimed than in the affirmation that these babies, before they know about God, before they have faith, before they have done anything, are all objects of God's infinite love.

But part of baptism, as well, is about community, the village. That truth transcends denominational differences and even language and culture. Several years ago a group of us was traveling in Greece. "In the Footsteps of Saint Paul." We were on the island of Santorini (where Paul never visited but probably wished he had). We were walking up a steep, winding road between white shining white buildings,

beneath the bluest sky I have ever seen. We passed a small church. Several of us stepped inside. When our eyes adjusted to the darkness we saw a baptism, a large group of people, standing, mostly dressed in black, in the middle an elaborately attired priest and a baby, quite bare. Not wanting to intrude, we began to back out the door but by this time we were noticed, all eyes on us. We gave a friendly wave and continued our exit. They, on the other hand, were pleased. "Stay," they indicated. "Come close. Join us." So, in Reeboks, bermuda shorts and polo shirts, we joined in a Greek Orthodox baptism. The baby was immersed in the font and his response was immediate. It was apparently cold water. Then placed in a towel while the priest chanted and sang,

he was handed around to a lot of people, family and friends, I assumed. As we left, a woman greeted us, in difficult English and told us that because we had participated in the baptism, we were not part of their family and community and then gave us a tiny little ribbon with a medallion of a baby's head to wear as a mark of our new status. Several of us have them, still.

The late Margaret Mead located the problem, namely the nuclear family; two parents and their children, living far away from their relatives. It didn't even exist in the ancient world. There is no word for it in ancient language. The nuclear family, she said, is a modern invention and not a particularly good one. Cornel West, speaking at

Rockefeller Chapel in Chicago recently about his experience in the African-American Christian church, commented that we are having a crisis in this country in all "the contexts of nurture." Nobody is tending the children. Everybody has abandoned them. Two parent families, on their own, have never worked, he said. When you see a nuclear family that looks its working, you can count on the fact that there are others, probably lots of others involved: grandparents—who are the real moral models—aunts, uncles, almost surely a church full of surrogate aunts and uncles and grandparents.

> **"Without Deacon Jones and my basketball coach and my Sunday School teachers, in addition to my**

two good parents, I wouldn't be where I am today," said Dr. Cornel West.

There are particular challenges today. One of them is economic. A *Chicago Tribune* editorial by Ellen Goodman was on the mark.

"Everybody knows it takes two incomes to maintain a middle-class life style," so Goodman proposes three parent families. "The arrangement would allow one parent to be between jobs at any time without forcing the whole family to face foreclosure." She claimed theological justification. "If God had meant babies to have only two parents, would he have made it

a three shift job? If there were three," she reasoned, "one could be the designated driver, worrier, and emergency back-up system."

She declined to say what would happen at bedtime but allowed as how she might have to revise her plan and have four parent families.

Several years ago the *Atlantic Monthly* published a feature length article by Barbara DeFoe Whitehead with the eye-catching title, "Dan Quayle was Right" in which the author suggests that while the Republican party was wrong to use the issue in the way it did by appearing to be attacking single mothers, and the use of one of television's most popular stars and shows was a colossal blunder,

the Vice-President was essentially right in raising the issue. Now let it be said that there are many single mothers doing a magnificent and loving and devoted job of parenting. And there are couples who are selfish, greedy, cruel and abusive. The fact remains that children with single parents are six times more likely to be poor and in trouble physically and emotionally than children with two parents. It is largely economic. Television glamorized Murphy Brown. The fact is that only one tenth of one percent of single mothers look like Murphy Brown: glamorous, single women with incomes over $50,000 per year. In a scholarly article in *The Christian Century*, Vanderbilt political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain comes to the point bluntly:

> **“To mutter nostrums about ‘choice’ and ‘independence’ to a fourteen year old crack addicted, undereducated pregnant girl living in a disintegrating and violent neighborhood is both cruel and contemptuous, although it is sometimes regarded as the liberal thing to do.” (*The Christian Century,* July 14, 1993)**

Neither liberal nor conservative solutions are working. We have helped create a system that seems to excuse everyone, but particularly men, from responsibility. Popular alternatives would punish the children for the failure of their parents, and fill the jails with absentee fathers.

The family has changed radically. John Updike, who has a finger on the pulse of our culture, writes about it a lot. In a short story, "Still of Some Use," a divorced man and woman and their grown son are cleaning out the attic of the house in which they once lived. They pitch the old games they used to play, each with a part missing, out the attic window into the back of a pickup truck. When they hit, the boxes explode and the parts fly off in every direction. At the end, the father and son drive off in the pickup truck to the dump. Family —parts missing—exploded—discarded. (*Trust Me,* p.27)

Futurist Robert Francoeur, wrote a very clever essay about the demise of the

family and the Victorian culture which gave it its shape. He borrows the vocabulary of anthropology and describes the facing of the Victi (Victorian) tribe and the emergence of a new tribe, the Nanus. The Victis, he says, lived a hard life. They spent most of their time living in overpopulated cities, in crowded sheds, forty, fifty, sixty stories above the ground, dressed in curious uniforms characterized by useless buttons on their collars and peculiar, ornamental pieces of cloth tied tightly around their necks. The men were breadwinners. Sex roles were strong and there wasn't much leisure among the Victi.

The emerging tribe, unlike the Victi, espouses sexual equality, marriage

happens much later, and they are very open about sex. Young men and women are sent off to their own "villages" know as colleges, where they can freely cohabit for four or five years without interference from their elders. The new culture is not as addicted to work as the Victi, but both show evidence of heavy drug use.

The Victis were chemically addicted to tobacco and alcohol, both fatal substances which killed them with systematic frequency. The new tribe discovered a grass-like substance and other assorted powders which kill them with even more frequency. (*The Futurist,* April 1980, "The Sexual Revolution")

It helps to laugh at change because much of it, in this case, is not amusing: the demise of the extended family, for instance. A friend of mine, in his mid-fifties, was telling me how empty his life is with the departure of the last child. "It's deathly quiet. I have leftover love —lots of it."

For millennia, "family" has described a social unit consisting of at least three generations, genetically related, and also geographically related, sometimes living on the same farm, in the same house. That changed during our life time. My grandfather ate in our home every Friday night. I knew my cousins and saw aunts and uncles every week. My children see theirs every few years. The late Margaret Mead observed that

the “Nuclear Family,” mother, father and children, standing alone, cut off from extended family, is recent invention and not a very good one.

All the weight which was once born by all the relatives now rests on two people and increasingly one person, often living in a strange place with few close friends. We are asking the nuclear family to stand alone and it wasn’t designed for that.

In a Presbyterian baptism, one question is asked of the congregation. In fact, Presbyterian baptisms happen in the context of regular public worship precisely because the community has an important part to play.

“Do you, the people of the church, promise to tell these children the good news of the gospel, to help them know all that Christianity commands, and by your fellowship to strengthen their ties to the household of God?”

The minister lets the people see the newly-baptized, symbolizing that what is happening is not only the affirmation of a mysterious and wonderful truth about God and the child, but also about the community of faith, the church—the village—in which she or he is now a member in good standing.

“Remind us of the promises given in our own baptism . . . ,” we pray in unison. And I am reminded. I know, although I

do not actually remember, the people who were present at my baptism that made promises and kept them. I tell this to every parent who brings a child here to be baptized. I tell them about Mrs. Evans, a tiny, white-haired wife of a retired dentist, a lady whose mission in life was, I think, to be the "Hound of Heaven," for surly, unruly, uncooperative and generally unpleasant adolescent Presbyterian boys. She was our Sunday School teacher. How she did it week after week, I'll never know. We were not a group of eager students. Quite to the contrary. We were not happy to be there. And when we graduated and went off to college or the service, she continued sending us letters and little devotional guides that I used to hide in my desk drawer. I've

concluded that part of the reason I am a minister is that I couldn't get away from Mrs. Evans, and I've concluded that she must have been in her pew when I was baptized and she simply made good on her promise.

I tell every parent that, and I'd better now confess what I tell those parents about members of the congregation. I tell them that the people in the congregation take that question very seriously; that they fully intend to be the church for you and your child; that they, on behalf of other Christians, in other places where you may end up living, fully intend to keep their promise and will be church school teachers, advisers, sponsors, counselors, mentors

and friends for you and your child in all the days ahead.

And baptism points to the truth beyond our small community of faith; that children are in trust for the future with us; that the village it takes to raise a child is sometimes the City of Charlotte, the State of North Carolina, the United States of America.

We cherish the idea that we cherish children in America. And perhaps we do, individually. But as a community? Marian Wright Edelman writes:

> **“Things happen to children here that don’t happen elsewhere. Every day three children die from abuse,**

nine are murdered, thirteen die from guns."

A recent report published by the Council on Families in America revealed that in every measurable category, from health to SAT scores, the quality of life for America's children is deteriorating. Rates of delinquency, crime, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, depression, poverty are escalating at an unprecedented scale.

The matter is complex. It will not reduce to the ideological mantras of too much government or too little government: too much money—not enough money. But there are basic issues we ought to be able to agree on as a village. The first is that it takes a village. All of the

children, in some way, belong to us. Parents are not in this alone. Another is surely that it is not a good idea for weapons designed to kill as many people as quickly as possible, to be available to our children. It may be constitutionally correct, but may I suggest that it is insanity to put the full weight of government on the side of the right of a gun dealer to sell weapons beside a public school. That is a village that has lost its heart and mind.

There are things we can agree upon while we are disagreeing and discussing specific political strategies. For instance, that it is a wise and conservative use of our resources to care for pregnant mothers: to do everything humanly possible to sustain

their health. Spending on children is a bargain. *Time Magazine* has said:

> **"One dollar spent in prenatal care for pregnant women saves three dollars in individual care during the first year of the infant's life. We can provide nine months of full drug treatment to a pregnant mother who is addicted, for $5,000; or we can pay $30,000 to care for the addicted baby she is going to bear for twenty days."**

Of, as some are proposing, we can do nothing in order to teach responsibility, in the process sacrificing a generation of poor, mostly minority children, who will, we know, make this beautiful culture and nation a nightmare for our children

to resolve after we have made our point about responsibility.

Robert Bellah has written an important book, *The Good Society.* He writes about religion and people of faith as custodians of vision and creators of community.

> **"If we are fortunate enough to have the gift of faith through which we see ourselves as members of the universal community, we bear a special responsibility. We can be . . . ambassadors of trust in a fearful world." (See Cynthia Campbell, *One Baptism, One Body, One Community,* a sermon, April 26, 1995)**

Gregory Jones, the Dean of Duke Divinity School, wrote an essay recently about parenting which referred to the story of Abraham and Isaac. Jones describes a conversation he had with a family friend who described her approach to parental responsibility as, "I just want my children to be happy." Jones suggests that "I just want my children to be happy," has become a mantra, a kind of catch-all moral imperative which is the delight of marketers and makers of child products—with adult implications. "I just want to be happy." What could be simpler, more elemental than that? And what's wrong with it? Is it so wrong to want to be happy? Of course not—unless and until the pursuit of happiness becomes our only and all-consuming passion, our icon and our god. Then

something is very seriously wrong in our heart and soul and probably the rest of us as well.

Jones quips, “Clearly we can make no sense of this awesome, difficult call from God that Abraham sacrifice his own son if we live in a world in which our highest priority is that our children be happy.” (*The Christian Century,* May 19-26)

Greg Jones, in the essay to which I referred, remembered the conversation with a friend who described her parenting theory and practice in terms of making her children happy. Jones also describes a remarkable conversation in a Duke classroom. A South African church leader was a visiting lecturer. The man had been

deeply involved in the struggle against apartheid. His story was harrowing and inspiring as he described the risks he had taken and the suffering and oppression and persecution and imprisonment and torture he had endured.

After the lecture, a Duke student asked what his children had thought about it all. How had they coped with the risks and suffering the family endured because of the parents' commitment to justice?

Jones said that it was a difficult moment. The South African minister told how painful it was because his children did suffer, received death threats and hateful phone calls. He described the

pain of being away from them for long periods of time.

The whole thing was so painful that he and his wife had spent much time talking about it and they had even asked their children's' forgiveness.

But, he said, "all four of his children now recognize the family's involvement in the struggle as a gift . . . even amidst the pain and suffering they endured growing up, they are grateful for the witness their family bore. They see that witness as a gift, for they recognize that their parents taught them the importance of having convictions on which you would stake your life."

What children need, Jones proposes, and what we all need, I would add, is the gift of a cause, a project, a mission which calls to the very depths of our souls and is big enough and important enough and holy enough to demand our all. "We should protest," Jones says, "not only when children are abused and neglected, but when they are left with shallow and hollow lives because they have never been invited and required to live for something more significant than themselves."

Rachel and her friends need the Church, the community of faith. No more, however, than we need her. "Let the children come to me," Jesus said. "For it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."

He was, at that moment, talking to adults who were working very hard and intensely on being religious. It's a hectic scene. Crowds of people are showing up wherever he is. They are clamoring for his attention. They are bringing their elderly and sick and blind and crippled. They come to him at all hours: from first dawn, through the heat of midday, to evening. They come without food and get hungry. They come without provisions for lodging. The crowd is growing. In the midst of it all, there are learned scholars from Jerusalem asking difficult questions: Why did you say that? Why did you say this? Don't you know it's against the law?

And here come the babies. His friends intercede. "Not now: can't you see how busy he is? It's late. We're all tired and hungry. Come back some other time.

And Jesus says:

> **"Let the little children come to me and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."**

And this—

> **"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."**

"Why doesn't anyone see God nowadays?" someone asked. A wise

rabbi answers that people are not willing to look that low.

“The fingerprints of God are not difficult to spot once you’ve found the proper angle of vision.” (William and Barbara Myers, *Engaging in Transcendence: The Church’s Ministry and Covenant with Small Children,* p. 1)

Rachel and her friends need the community of faith, all of us: parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends, and the many of us who don’t know them at all. They need all of us—because it really does take a village. And we need every one of them—to remind us of God’s wonderful gift of life, God’s amazing grace, God’s gracious presence, God’s love in Jesus Christ . . .

the One who welcomes the children, who opens his arms to us all. The one in whom Rachel—and all of us are loved and cared for and forever safe.